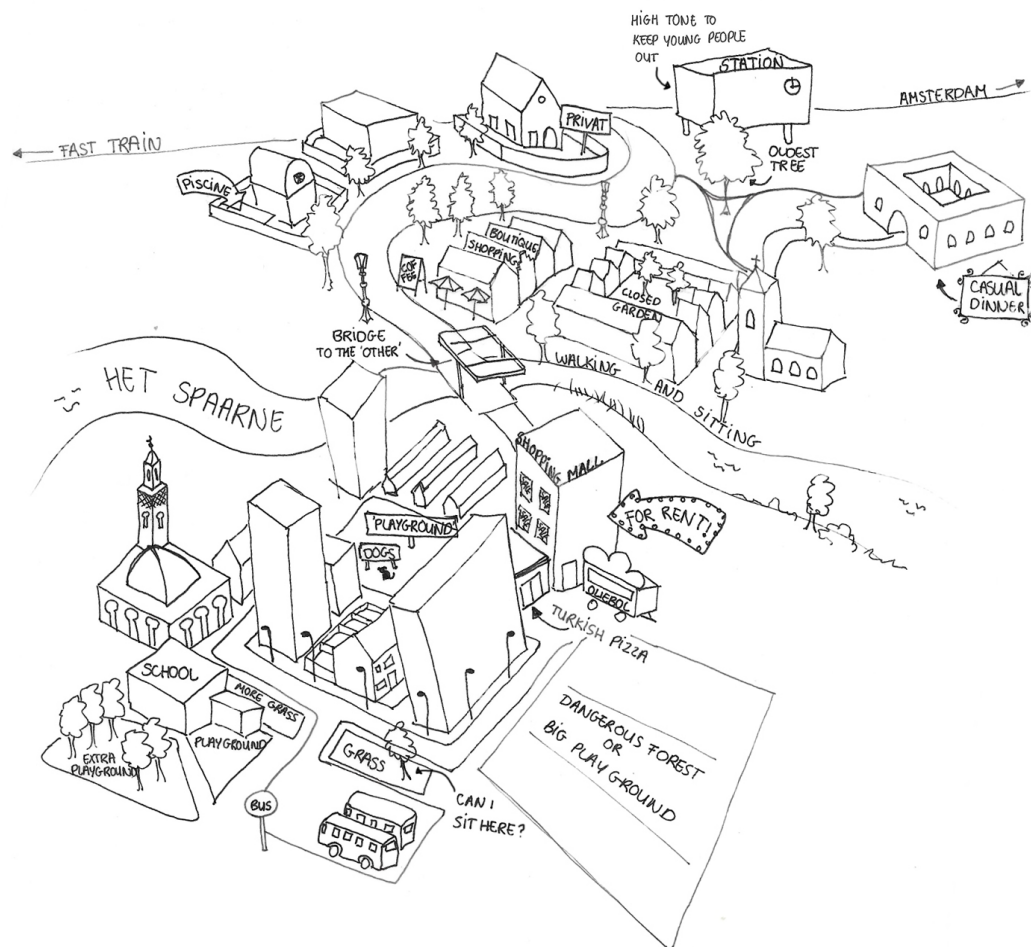


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## Reflection

*Upon the research and design process of my graduation project*



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## Reflection

*In this reflection, I will look back on the research and the design process of my graduation project. My graduation project consists of a theoretical research paper about architectural approaches to cultivate open conditions to promote equal opportunities and enable new connections. The final project is a mixed-use building and community centre focused on teenagers and young adults in a post-war neighbourhood in Haarlem.*

This graduation project is part of Explore Lab, a graduation track within the MSc Architecture. Unlike other graduation tracks, Explore Lab starts from your own fascination rather than a guiding theme, location, or topic. My fascination derives from my personal experience of growing up in a post-war neighbourhood. I have good memories of growing up in my neighbourhood. As a kid, I played a lot outside; when I got older, I strolled through the shopping mall, and I felt safe riding home, even when it was dark outside. My perception changed when I went to high school in Heemstede, a prosperous village south of Haarlem. What I perceived as normal and safe was not the same for my new friends. Some of them did not dare to ride home when it was dark, or their parents did not want them to go to my neighbourhood at all. Throughout my architectural studies, and perhaps also just by getting older and more socially engaged, my fascination with social differences grew. On the one hand, I became intrigued by the different perceptions of people regarding the same space. On the other hand, I was interested in the relationship between the architectural appearance of the built environment and how it captures and reflects social inequality. Although these social topics relate to architecture and the built environment, I was unsure if there would be any role for an architect in addressing them. Therefore, my fascination as a theme for my graduation was not only a topic I wanted to learn more about, but also a way to better position myself in the realm of architecture while exploring what kind of architect I would like to be.

My research started with a strong theoretical focus, drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Richard Sennett, Edward Soja, and David Harvey. Their perspectives on the social and economic processes that influence the built environment and vice versa made me think a lot about my own role as a designer within the built environment. However, their texts rarely focus on architecture itself. While reading, I gained a lot of new knowledge, but this was also a pitfall. I easily got lost in papers about social injustice, inequality, and the downsides of capitalism and globalisation. The questions these papers raised were very interesting to me; nevertheless, they did not immediately help me to formulate a design focus for my graduation project.

With feedback from my research mentor, I used the second part of my research to bring the theoretical research literally back to the ground. A method

I used in this part of my research was sketching. My goal was to find ways for as many different people as possible to interact with certain architectural elements. Therefore, I set myself a small design task: to create a path close to the location of my project, and each time the path had a different theme, such as different senses, activities, or the passing of time. I think this part of the research helped me gain a better understanding of the location, but also to create different design approaches that could eventually help shape my design project.

The concept of the design changed a lot during my graduation period. I think one important factor was my graduation planning. In the past years (yes, my graduation took years), I combined my graduation studies with elite sport (rowing). Consequently, my available time per week for my graduation work was limited and fragmented. During heavy periods of training, camps, and competitions, I was often unable to work on my project. In the off-seasons, I studied a lot. One disadvantage was that after a break from studying, it often took time to get back into my project again. It also made my design skills and my use of architectural software a bit rusty. Additionally, all my fellow students graduated a long time ago, which made it harder for me to casually discuss my project or ideas with others. However, I think the passing of time also benefitted the design. The months where I set aside my graduation project to focus on training gave me space to reevaluate my ideas and develop a clearer vision of what the project should be. During an intensive design period, a lot of different ideas emerge, and while being in the midst of all these thoughts, it can be difficult to grasp the essence. Initially, my concept started as a traveling circus that could settle at different urban borders. Although I still like this idea, grounding my project on a specific site helped me develop a design that is strongly connected to the environment and its particular issues. This process allowed me to introduce more layers into the design and bind the imagined users more deeply to the location, something that gradually became a key design strategy.

During the process, the feedback from my design and research mentor helped me to develop my design and communication methods. The long period without studying caused a bit of a gap in my skills for translating my ideas into drawings and models. In the beginning of the design process, I found it easier to put my ideas into words rather than drawings. However, as an architecture student, this made it difficult to communicate design concepts or effectively receive feedback. Therefore, as the design process progressed, I forced myself to translate my thoughts into models and drawings, exploring multiple ideas without trying to find the answers straight away. I think this helped me to have more in-depth conversations with my mentors about my design and ultimately make clearer design decisions.

Finally, my graduation project taught me a lot about myself. When working in a group on a design task, I often take on the role of generating multiple ideas, some more realistic than others, while maintaining an overview of the project as a whole. I feel less confident in making design decisions or committing to one specific direction. In group projects, this often works well because there is room for discussion about different directions and design choices. However, this graduation project was entirely my own, so I had to make every decision myself. On the one hand, it made me realise that I prefer working in a team, where I feel I can contribute most effectively. On the other hand, this project helped me to become more confident and decisive when needed, while still remaining open to new insights and ideas. This was evident in my design process after P3. When the design began to take shape, I felt it could have more dynamic spaces by adjusting the appearance and materiality. Over the next two weeks, I re-evaluated my design by creating several radically different conceptual models of the building. Taking this step back and maintaining an open mind ultimately strengthened my design by introducing richer spatial layers and interactions.

*1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your master programme (MSc AUBS)?*

My graduation project is part of Explore Lab within the master track Architecture. As mentioned before, the Explore Lab studio uses personal fascination as the point of departure for graduation. My project focuses on social design, exploring how architecture can enable social interaction and inclusivity. Since it is not possible to design a social situation directly, my project concentrates on design approaches that allow for open-ended interpretation and diverse use by people of different backgrounds and ages. This has resulted in a multi-use building aimed primarily at teenagers and young adults from various neighbourhoods in Haarlem.

The work of theorists and architects such as Pallasmaa, Hertzberger, and Van Eyck has been instrumental in developing my approach, particularly in small-scale architecture that fosters strong connections to the environment, sensory experiences, and social interactions.

I believe this graduation project aligns well with my overall master track. In MSc 1, I worked on “Living with Water” in the Dwelling studio, and in MSc 2, I participated in “Housing in the Himalayas” within the Global Housing studio. Both courses focused on social and environmental challenges in architecture.

Subsequently, I chose to explore these issues further in my theory thesis, where I investigated social inequality as a consequence of capitalism and how materialized space functions as a mechanism of power through strategies such as privatization, boundary-making, and the erosion of public thresholds.

My graduation project integrates the knowledge and skills developed

across these courses into a design approach that seeks to create thresholds and open conditions for different users and activities—both now and in an unpredictable future.

*2. How did your research influence your design/recommendations and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?*

My graduation research builds upon my theory thesis, which examines the role of architecture in relation to capitalism and globalization. Initially, my research scope was too broad, making it difficult to determine a clear design direction. However, design exploration played a key role in focusing my research. By designing a path, I was compelled to translate theoretical ideas into spatial elements—shapes, materials, and spatial sequences.

Throughout this process, I shifted my research approach. Rather than relying solely on theoretical texts by Harvey or Lefebvre, I explored the work of architects such as Pallasmaa and Hertzberger, who focus on human perception, the body's interaction with space, and the potential for social connection through design. This led to the development of three design approaches aimed at fostering connections between people and their built environment. These approaches do not dictate a single design solution but instead serve as guiding principles for design decisions. For instance:

- Wider staircases that encourage sitting and gathering
- Visually connected spaces that create fluid transitions
- Edges designed for alternative use, such as skating or informal seating
- Walls that retain warmth longer, enhancing comfort in outdoor spaces
- Sheltered areas that offer wind protection

My project was a continuous interplay between research and design, where each phase informed the other. At the same time, the design remains open-ended, allowing for multiple interpretations and adaptations by future users.

*3. How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?*

At the start of my research, I focused primarily on reading and theoretical analysis. While this provided valuable knowledge, it did not always help in defining a clear design scope. Combined with the long timeline of my graduation process, this occasionally hindered me from starting the actual design work. Eventually, I used design as a method to refine my research focus. Although these design explorations were not formally included in my research paper, they helped establish a stronger connection between theory and practice.

If I were to redo my graduation process, I would incorporate design

exploration much earlier. This could have helped me develop a more structured design methodology—perhaps even leading to a more precise set of design tools or strategies.

As my project evolved, my focus shifted towards designing elements that accommodate multiple activities while fostering connections between spaces. However, in the early stages, I was deeply immersed in the details of the project, sometimes at the expense of understanding the overall architectural composition. This led to an overwhelming number of design interventions—such as a specific window detail or foldable stairs—without fully considering their role within the larger spatial framework.

After P3, I took a step back to create conceptual models and material studies. Although some of these models felt unnecessary at the time, they helped me reevaluate my design approach and break free from preconceived ideas. Ideally, this process should have started earlier in my design phase, as physical modeling could have played a valuable role during the conceptual development. Looking back, I believe integrating sketching and model-making at multiple scales would have improved my ability to synthesize design ideas effectively.

#### *4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?*

The academic and societal relevance of my project lies in both the research and the design framework. Today, capitalism and globalization shape our societies in profound ways. While products, money, and knowledge move freely across the world, physical and social boundaries continue to rise—often through privatization and exclusionary planning. This results in growing inequality, where access to urban resources is unevenly distributed.

At the same time, digitalization has transformed social interactions. While technology allows us to connect with like-minded individuals across the globe, it can also create social fragmentation within our immediate surroundings. In cities, people move quickly—on bikes, trains, or cars, often wearing headphones—further disconnecting from their environment and from each other.

While these global issues extend beyond the scope of my project, they all have spatial consequences. My research explores architectural approaches that encourage openness and social interaction, aiming to create spaces that:

- Accommodate diverse users with different needs, physical abilities, and cultural backgrounds
- Encourage social encounters, fostering opportunities for interaction and exchange
- Provide a sense of belonging, counteracting the isolating effects of digitalization and privatization



This vision is reflected in my design, which is strategically located between two socioeconomically distinct neighborhoods in Haarlem—one with the lowest income levels and another with the highest. These areas are separated by a river but connected by a small ferry for cyclists and pedestrians. My project is situated directly adjacent to this ferry, serving as a potential meeting point for teenagers from both communities.

*5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?*

In a world where social inequality is rising, privatization is increasing, and economic efficiency dominates urban planning, the availability of open, inclusive public spaces is more important than ever—especially for teenagers.

With the rise of technology and social media, many young people remain within their own digital bubbles, where interactions are curated by algorithms. At the same time, studies indicate that teenage loneliness and depression are on the rise, often linked to reduced physical social interaction. This project serves as an example of how architecture can counteract these trends by providing spaces that encourage real-life encounters and shared activities.

Public spaces designed for skating, dancing, art, and other creative expressions can foster organic connections between different groups. For teenagers, in particular, friction and spontaneous encounters are essential parts of personal development and broadening perspectives. My project seeks to illustrate the importance of such socially generative spaces and could potentially serve as a model for future design strategies.